



## New families celebrate adoption

**'Happy proceedings' at area courts**

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**News Staff Reporters**

After two years of hoping, waiting and disappointments, Ira and Elizabeth Levy's dream finally came true Tuesday.

The couple became first-time parents when they adopted their 3-year-old foster daughter, Gabriela.

In an adoption proceeding conducted by Washtenaw County Circuit Court Judge Timothy Connors, the Levys vowed to "properly raise and care for" Gabriela and "provide her with love, guidance and understanding that children need from their parents."

"It was a long haul," Elizabeth Levy said after the hearing, "but it was worth it."

Washtenaw County Circuit Court took on a festive atmosphere as court staff and state officials helped 16 adoptive families and their 19 children celebrate "Michigan Adoption Day."

The halls of Livingston County's 44th Circuit Court in Howell were also filled with celebration as eight families adopted 12 children.

"In the end, family is everything," said Livingston County Circuit Judge Stanley Latreille in remarks he made during the hearing that ended with Gary and Brenda Hazlett adopting 22-month-old Leighla Kay Hazlett.

"These are very happy proceedings," Latreille said, beaming at the young adoptee, who took great delight in interrupting his every word with a happy squeal.

The circuit courts in Livingston and Washtenaw County were among 34 courts around the state where adoptions for between 255 and 266 children were finalized. Although adoptions are usually private and in closed court sessions, on

Tuesday the public and media were invited to attend.

This is the first time Michigan has participated in the National Adoption Day, an annual campaign that brings attention to the numbers of children waiting to be adopted.

The Michigan Family Independence Agency reported that at the end of September, 19,490 children were in foster care statewide and 12,701 children were temporary court wards - children made wards of the court as a result of child protective proceedings.

There were 244 adoption cases filed in Washtenaw County in 2002, but only 79 cases were filed by the end of September, the juvenile court's statistics show.

Betty Ann Lawson, a single mother and licensed foster care parent, took the opportunity to encourage other single adults to consider foster care and adoption.

Lawson, a Dexter resident, adopted her 14-year-old foster son, Matthew Ross.

"People are concerned that teenagers come with a lot of baggage," Lawson said. "But it's been positively rewarding for us. We knew at the beginning that this was going to be a strong relationship."

Ann Arbor residents Barton and Deborah Yeary waited for a year to be chosen for a direct placement either by a birth family or through a hospital. The couple was contacted about young Nathan. They said a special bond developed from the moment they saw him.

"We already felt like Nathan was ours," said Deborah Yeary after she and her husband became the 10-month-old's adoptive parents.

In Washtenaw County, the adoptions were held in separate courtrooms and presided over by Juvenile Court Referrees Gail Altenburg and Molly Schikora and Circuit Court Judges Connors and Donald Shelton.

It was a special day for Shelton, the presiding judge of the juvenile division, for personal reasons: He is an adoptive father of two children, now grown.

"I hope that you will get to the day where I am so that you can have the blessings that I have now," Shelton told parents at a luncheon for the families. "Each child gave me a beautiful granddaughter, so the legacy of adoption lives on and has made our family very happy."

"Giving Thanks for Families" was the theme for the event and the adoptive families in Livingston and Washtenaw counties did just that at receptions provided by the FIA and the courts.

"Thanksgiving will have a meaning that's a little more special this year than before," said Gary Hazlett. It has been a long road to the adoption of their

youngest child, Hazlett said; she came to the family as a foster child when she was 31/2 weeks old.

"We've been waiting for this day for quite a while," he said.

The Hazlett family and the other Livingston County adoptive families celebrated after their adoption hearings at the reception.

Michigan Supreme Court Justice Marilyn Kelly, speaking to parents in Washtenaw County, said that although this is a time to celebrate, it was also a time to remember other children waiting for permanent homes.

"We should be mindful of those waiting in foster care," Kelly said. "Let's hope this will draw attention to their needs so they will have safe and loving homes."

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